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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relationship of reading and television and describes a "critical viewing skills" program ("Spudbuster") for combatting the effects of prolonged TV watching. The paper enumerates helpful suggestions for both parents and teachers to ensure that children's television watching is not excessive and that what children do watch contributes to their education and fosters quality learning. The paper hopes to sensitize teachers and parents to the "enemy" in the living room and the resultant problems of inordinate TV watching. (Author/NKA)

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Reading and Television : Some Concerns; Some Answers !

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This paper discusses the relationship of reading and television and describes a " critical viewing skills " program for combatting the effects of prolonged t.v. watching. The paper hopes to sensitize teachers and parents to the " enemy " in the living room and the resultant problems of inordinate t.v. watching.

Every night, in America, families join together for a certain activity. Families watch " Roseanne " and re-runs of many television programs. Children, in some instances, watch cartoons such as " The Flintstones " and other infantile programs. Adolescents, on the other hand, may watch M.T.V. or may even watch movies on video cassettes.

There is an enormous amount of literature on the detrimental effects of television watching. It has been found that children watch up to 42 hours a week of t.v. Other studies have shown that the average t.v. is on almost 8 hours a day. Liebert and Sprafkin (1988) have compiled a massive amount of data and reviewed many studies attesting to the detrimental effects of t.v. watching. These effects are of two types.

Detrimental Effects of Prolonged T.V. Watching.

One group of researchers feel that children learn aberrant views of life from watching t.v. They learn sex role sterotypes which are negative and many children watch a gargantuan amount of violence, murder, assault and fighting on t.v. They see negative role models, see cleavage and learn distorted views of life. They see extremes- either people are very rich and beautiful, or they are ugly and stupid- they are very few average t.v. families.

Another group of researchers feel that television watching takes time away from the following activities- reading, doing homework, preparing for tests, reviewing what was learned in school on that particular day, doing hobbies and engaging in sports and inter-personal activities and religious persuits.

If the average child in America watches even one hour of t.v. a day, if you multiply that by 365 days in a year, then multiply that by an average t.v. watching span of about 15 years (from 3 to 18) you have an idea of the amount of time spent in front of a t.v. Much of this time is not monitored by parents. Therefore, children are watching cartoons, and various television shows which have absolutely no educational value at all. In other words, they learn nothing new from watching " The Flintstones " or other cartoon characters. This is very precious time which is taken away from reading, writing, looking up information in the encylopedia and discerning words in the dictionary.

Some parents, to their credit, do monitor television watching. They insure that children watch the " Discovery Channel " and that they watch television shows which have some redeeming educational value or content. For example, there are many " mini-series " which deal with historical content. The " North and the South " recounted the Civil War . The mini-series on " Raoul Wallenberg " helped many

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children understand World War Two. Currently, an excellent movie, " Schindler's List " will enhance the child's understanding of the Holocaust.

In other words, parents ensure that the television watching of their children contributes to their education and quality learning. They make sure that their children watch " Travels in Europe with Rick Steves " so that they can learn about the world in which they live.

Teachers, on the whole, are aware that children are not spending enough time on their homework, or on reading independently. Instead of reading, they are renting video-tapes and watching television instead of going to the local public library. Most teachers know that their student's reading rate and comprehension is not what it could be. They are aware that their students are watching Rocky and Bullwinkel instead of reading age appropriate materials. But they are also aware that parents cannot monitor their kids all of the time.

Probably of greater concern is the research which indicates that special education students- the learning disabled, the mentally retarded or the slow learners- are the ones that are watching the MOST amount of t.v. and the shows that are the LEAST educationally redeeming. (in other words, cartoons, sit-coms, m.t.v. etc)

A side concern is the influence that commercials have on children. Kids see " GO-BOTS " advertised on the tube and pester parents to buy these things. Commercials indicate " GOTTA HAVE IT " when any straight thinking Martian knows that you are not going to die if you don't get a PEPSI or COKE or whatever soft drink. Cereals which are loaded with sugar, artificial flavoring and additives are advertised and children grow up addicted to sugar flakes, tarts, pops etc.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO ?

Teachers can help curb the large amount of television watching. There are programs available to help teachers work with parents and sensitize them to the negative effects of t.v. One such program is SPUDBUSTER, (Siegel, Stanley, Shaughnessy, 1994) designed to help combat " couch potatoe-ism " . This dreaded malady is sweeping America as more and more students become " coach potatoes " and spend time watching " Rocky I,II,III,IV, and V " and Nighmare on Elm Street, one two three four and five and the other nightmares that come at us from Hollywood which have no educational level whatsoever. SPUDBUSTER is a cooperative venture between children, parents and teachers to try to make parents and children aware of the detrimental effects of t.v. Ten lessons are provided as are letters to parents and alternative activities to enhance critical viewing skills. This program is designed to teach parents, and students that

excessive t.v. watching can have negative effects, and takes time away from homework, studying for tests, and reading.

TEACHERS CAN :

1) Use the t.v. judiciously and assign follow up homework assignments after an excellent historical or documentary program has been aired.

2) Indicate the importance of indedepndent reading via Parent Teacher Conferences, P.T.A. meetings, and the assigning of book reports which will mandate that students read in their leisure time.

3) Teach critical viewing as well as critical thinking skills. Some critical viewing skills are to inform students that a) plots are made up b) characters are actors c) incidents are often fabricated d) settings are often constructed e) programs are broadcast to make money f) money for programs comes from advertisers purchasing air time g) ads are to sell products to the viewers h) audience size determines broadcaster income (Door, Graves, & Phelps, 1980)

4) Recognize that t.v. can solve some educational problems. If teaching about rocks and rock formation, a t.v. special on the Grand Canyon can be helpful- especially since students in Vermont and Maine may never see the Grand Canyon.

5) Encourage the reading of the book when a t.v. special based on the book is available.

6) Assign book reports. This will enhance reading, writing, and hopefully instill a love of learning.

7) Discuss current events periodically in history lessons. This may encourage students to watch the news.

8) Work cooperatively with parents, not to eliminate t.v. watching, but to examine what children are watching, and how much time they spend watching programs that have no learning value.

9) Investigate the SPUDBUSTER program as an option to enhance their skills and abilities in this area.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO ?

Parents can do much to curb their children's inordinate t.v. watching. Parents have a certain responsibility to insure that children's time is spent wisely. Not to provide adequate supervision is tantamount to neglect.
Parents need to recognize that children form habits. Television watching is a habit that is formed early on in life. While watching Mr. Rogers and Sesame Street may have some educational value, watching cartoons is simply a waste of very valuable precious time.

If the proverb " You are what you eat" is true, then verily " You are what you watch" is probably also true. Students raised on a diet of cartoons and idiotic, moronic time wasting shows may have later educational deficiencies and educational attitudes.
Students who read magazines, newspapers, books, and watch the Discover channel and educational enriching programs will likely be later intellectually gifted and educationally prosperous.

PARENTS CAN :

1) Become a SPUDBUSTER and begin to monitor their children's t.v. viewing habits. One week will give parents an idea as to what and how much their kids are watching. SPUDBUSTER will provide a means to do this./

2) Parents can act as role models and only watch educationally redeeming and relevant shows.

3) Parents can discuss what they have watched with their children.

4) Parents can purchase electronic aides to help control the out of control viewing habits of their children. There are three main devices which can be hooked up to the t.v. T.V. Allowance, Time Slot and Supervision are all gadgets that help parents wean their children from their literal addiction to the television. There are 800 numbers that provide information about each of these products (800 231-4410; 800 653-5911; and 800 845-1911 respectively). Costs run from about $ 90.00 to $ 130.00 at this time. These devices and gadgets insure parental control and allow parents to allocate a certain amount of t.v. watching time.

5) Hold family meetings to decide on what will be watched during the weeknights and on weekends. There can be time allocated for " entertainment " watching and time allocated for " educational " watching and time allocated for " current events " and " political events " .

6) Help children discriminate between fantasy and reality. We all know that there is no ENTERPRISE orbiting the earth and that Captain Kirk is simply William Shatner, a well paid

actor. However, children see it on television and do believe some things that they see on t.v.

7) Parents must also recognize when they use the t.v. as a " baby sitter " and what the long term ramifications and repercussions of that behavior will be.

8) Parents must also recognize that sitting in front of the t.v. may contribute to their child's obesity, possible attention deficit disorder or hyperactivity, poor academic achievement, a passive learning style and low frustation tolerance.

9) Parents must recognize and realize that if their children are watching " Gilligan's Island ", they are not reading, writing, doing homework, reviewing for tests or learning anything about the world.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to cursorily discuss the relationship between t.v. and reading and has reviewed one program designed to enhance critical viewing skills. This paper has attempted to highlight the important issues relevant to t.v. and reading. The authors would be happy to consult with parents, teachers and administrative personnel regarding this issue. The authors can be contacted at :

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